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The News

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The News

When a war breaks out or a bank is robbed, when fire, flood, or earthquake devastates the land, the newsboys everywhere cry, "Extra! Extra!" But no such challenge greeted the ear of the pioneer. Out on the lonely prairie the silence was broken only by the howling of the wolves. News, in a modern sense, was unknown.

The first bits of news received by the pioneer claim holders were brought, not by the printed page, but by other pioneers in their movement westward, by a distant neighbor who chanced to call at the cabin, or perchance by the shoemaker who, in his regular autumnal perambulating visits, always came well-laden with gossip. Steamboats plying the Mississippi between St. Louis and St. Paul likewise came to be a fruitful source of news.

The pioneer was not long content, however, without newspapers. Indeed, the press followed closely after the plow. The Dubuque *Visitor* was the first newspaper in what is now Iowa. On May 11, 1836, the first issue appeared, a four-page Democratic journal printed by John King on a press brought from Ohio. In 1837 the name of this paper was changed to the *Iowa News*. Later it was succeeded by the *Miners' Express*, whose

lineal descendant is the Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald*.

In 1837 *The Western Adventurer and Herald* was printed at Montrose. After a struggling existence of two years it was removed to Fort Madison, where it became a Whig publication called *The Patriot*. It was finally moved to Burlington where it is now known as the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*. Meanwhile the Burlington *Gazette* had been established and still flourishes. The first newspaper in Davenport was *The Iowa Sun and Davenport and Rock Island News*. It is said that "the Sun shone for four years."

In the early forties Iowa City was the capital of the territory and the home of two newspapers — the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* and the *Iowa Standard*. The former, a Democratic "organ," was frequently referred to by the *Standard* as the "Locofoco Rag," while the latter, a Whig journal, was in turn called the "Whiggery Humbug." The old files of the "Rag" and the "Humbug," which are still in use, present an interesting contrast with a modern daily. They are innocent of glaring headlines, cartoons, half-tones, blatant theater attractions, or the adventures of Mr. Jiggs, yet they fairly bristle with information concerning the life and activities of those early days.

Personal items were given less attention in the pioneer newspapers than in the present journals. Editorial comment, however, was likely to be far

more extensive, vehement, and bombastic. Incidents of national interest were prominent, while witticisms, short stories, and poems filled many columns. But politics provided the life and color for the early press.

Announcements, notices, and advertisements in the early newspapers were displayed in small type, yet they were replete with interest and gave a vivid portrayal of pioneer life. In August, 1837, a Burlington paper announced that the regular annual license fee of ten dollars was due from "all persons engaged in retailing spirituous liquors and groceries" in Des Moines County. A little later the same paper announced a lecture on the subject of "Temperance and Reform" to be delivered "on Monday evening next, at early candle-light." Bargains in merchandise were explained in detail and the merits of patent medicines were boldly proclaimed. To attract particular attention or on account of the exigencies of space, advertisements were sometimes set lengthwise of a column.

Pioneer newspaper editing was not one of the main-traveled highways to quick riches. In spite of the times being "so hard that you can catch pike on the naked hook," one publisher announced that his paper was to be "enlarged at several dollars extra expense," but the low subscription price would remain the same. Another editor, in urging delinquent patrons to pay their subscriptions, said, "We don't want money desperately bad, but our

creditors do. And no doubt they owe you. If you pay us, we'll pay them, and they'll pay you."

Difficulties were encountered not only in the selection and publication of news, but in its distribution as well. In 1839 Governor Robert Lucas vetoed a legislative measure which authorized the postmaster of Davenport to have mail from that place to Dubuque "conveyed in two horse post coaches, twice a week" during the session of the Legislative Assembly. At that time no mail route had been established to Iowa City. Letters and papers for residents in the new capital of the territory were brought from Muscatine by any one having business there. One pioneer wrote that he had "often brought out the Iowa City mail in the crown of his hat," or securely tied in a pocket handkerchief.

Mail routes moved westward with the progress of civilization, though it was not until 1855 that "the first stage and first mail arrived at Sioux City." This, it is said, was "hailed by the denizens as a bright omen of prosperity, which seemed to infuse into them new life and spirit." As late as 1861 the people of Hampton had no mail for nearly seven weeks because the "snow was deep, and the mail agent would not venture out." An early settler in Mason City once walked fifty miles on snow shoes, carrying the mail on his back from Iowa Falls. Thus came the news to pioneer Iowans.

J. A. SWISHER